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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VATICAN 000115

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DEPT FOR EUR/WE LARREA; DRL/IRF KELLY AND MATES

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TAGS: [IS PHUM KIRF PREL VT XF](#)
SUBJECT: VATICAN: HOLY LAND CUSTODIAN FOCUSED ON SURVIVAL

REF: a) Martin - Larrea 4/06 email, et al.; b) Vatican 104, 05 Vatican 546 et al.; c) Vatican 63, Vatican 77, Vatican 104
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CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Pol/Econ Chief, Vatican, State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

[11.](#) (C) Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Roman Catholic Custodian of the Holy Land, told the Ambassador during a recent visit to Rome that his continuing contact with Hamas was simply "a question of survival." Pizzaballa talks to various authorities about technical issues related to the maintenance of the Christian holy sites in Israel and Palestine. According to Pizzaballa and other contacts, such contact is unavoidable and not diplomatic or political in nature. Contacts have told us that Pizzaballa is "the last person to be an apologist for Hamas." He suggested to the Ambassador that it might be possible to funnel aid to the Palestinian people through local civil and religious authorities with less danger of aiding the overall structure of the organization. Pizzaballa appeared in Vatican-based media again June 14 speaking about current violence in the region. In light of this media exposure and his importance on the ground, we found him an extremely useful contact. He told the Ambassador he would be open to contact with ConGen Jerusalem. End Summary

Contact with Hamas

[12.](#) (SBU) Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Roman Catholic Custodian of the Holy Land (caretaker of Christian holy sites), caused a stir in the media in April when he told a reporter from Milan's Corriere della Sera that he had been talking to Hamas. He hinted that more dialogue was in the offing. Speculation ensued that this could be the first step toward official dialogue between the Holy See and Hamas, something that might give the organization greater international credibility.

Complicated Context

[13.](#) (SBU) In fact, as Post relayed to the Department at the time (ref a), any dialogue taking place between Pizzaballa and Hamas has to be taken in context. The Custodian of the Holy Land is the Minister Provincial (i.e. the major superior) of all the priests of the Franciscan order living in the Middle East. He is appointed by the pope, but maintains some degree of autonomy, connected in part to his membership in the Franciscan order. His main task is to coordinate and direct the reception of pilgrims who come to the Holy Land. All the Catholic Christian sanctuaries in the area are under his jurisdiction. He oversees their financial status and works with local authorities to care for and maintain the sites, including related schools and parishes. The Franciscans have to deal with the civil authorities - whoever they may be - on technical issues related to the maintenance of these sites.

14. (C) Fr. David Jaeger, the Israeli-born convert to Catholicism who is a Holy See negotiator on legal issues with Israel, has emphasized to us that Fr. Pizzaballa's contacts with Hamas are purely technical (ref a). "He has to talk to them because the Franciscans are totally under their control. Not talking to them would be like hostages refusing to speak to

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their kidnappers," he said. According to Jaeger, Palestinian police often come into the churches. They sometimes study for their exams in the churches and other buildings administered by the order. Contact is inevitable and necessary. Jaeger likened the situation to that of aid organizations that have to maintain contact with the Palestinian authorities in order to fulfill their mission.

15. (C) Jaeger emphasized that Pizzaballa had no intention of political discussions with Hamas and was aware of the danger of giving the group valuable fodder for public relations. He noted that he knew the writer of the Corriere article and could see Pizzaballa being manipulated into comments that could be misconstrued. "He is the last person to be an apologist for Hamas," Jaeger emphasized.

Close Relations with the Israelis

16. (C) Commenting on Pizzaballa's relations with Israel, Jaeger called him perhaps the Israeli government's favorite churchman "of all time." Jaeger said he speaks flawless Hebrew - like a native. "I know no foreigner with a better understanding of Israel," he said. "Pizzaballa appreciates and sympathizes with the Israeli people. He isn't in the pocket of the government; he's just an honest man doing his job," he concluded.

A Question of Survival

17. (C) During a discussion with the Ambassador on a recent visit to Rome, Pizzaballa confirmed much of what we had heard. Ethically, he said, he would love to avoid talking to Hamas, but it is "a question of survival." He said that non-Catholic Christians in the Holy Land often share a strong aversion to Hamas, but they, too, see no choice but to work with them on technical issues. When undertaking any type of project involving the Christian community, "you have to talk" to the local authorities, according to Pizzaballa. Continuing on this theme, Pizzaballa suggested that it might be possible to funnel aid to the Palestinian people through local civil and religious authorities with less danger of aiding the overall structure of Hamas.

Security Tactics

18. (C) On Israeli security operations, Pizzaballa said he "understood well" the danger of homicide bombers, but indicated he thought the Israelis were "going beyond" what was just - or effective - in some of their tactics. He said that at some security checkpoints, for example, Israeli security forces would search Christian and Muslim travelers extensively, causing great delays and inconvenience. At the same time, however, their baggage would not be screened - an apparent loophole in the procedure.

Fundamental Agreement

19. (C) Turning to the continuing saga of the Fundamental Agreement between the Holy See and Israel (ref b), Pizzaballa told the Ambassador in confidence that the Holy See should put more pressure on Israel on outstanding issues connected to the pact. He noted speculation that the pope might visit Israel next year, but said he hoped the Vatican wouldn't agree to such a trip without significant progress on Fundamental Agreement issues (ref c). If the pope were to visit Israel, Pizzaballa added that he would have to visit Bethlehem; that would amount to a legitimization of Hamas for some.

In the News Again

10. (C) Pizzaballa appeared in Vatican-based media again June 14, warning that current violence in the region indicated that "the risks of a civil war are concrete." The Franciscans pleaded for dialogue between the various Palestinian factions of Fatah and Hamas. Pizzaballa said that Christians faced no greater risk than others in the current situation, but still could not "remain silent." He noted that Judeh Mourqos, "the only Christian in the government," had resigned.

Comment

11. (C) In light of Pizzaballa's exposure in the media, his knowledge of the region, and his importance on the ground, we found him an extremely useful contact. He told the Ambassador he had not yet met with officials from ConGen Jerusalem, but would be open to contact.
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